

THE RABBI'S GIFT

(1/31/10)

Scripture Lesson: Hebrews 13:1-2, 20-21
Matthew 25:34-40

“Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” (Hebrews 13:1-2)

There was a monastery that, over the space of several decades, gradually fell upon difficult times.

It had once been a great monastery with many monks and an abbot who was highly respected as a wise and spiritual leader. The monastery served as a retreat center for clergy and laity of many different denominations, a place where people from the surrounding area could come apart from the world of their daily life to receive spiritual direction, where they could come to experience spiritual renewal. The liturgies, which were open to the general public not only on Saturday evening and Sunday morning but every day, were so creative, so filled with joy, so meaningful that people came from miles around to attend.

The monks of this order lived in harmony and contentment as a true Christian community. They welcomed guests in a spirit of hospitality. Their meals, though simple, were prepared with loving care. They applied themselves to their daily tasks, no matter how menial, with a spirit of joy. It was not as if some tasks, some ministries were important and other tasks, other ministries were unimportant or less important. The ministry of the retreat master was carried out with the same level of attention and care as the ministry of the cook or the landscaper. It was as if they knew that all work is holy and that everything they did, no matter how small or insignificant it might seem, was an essential element of the monastic life.

The monks didn't talk a lot to each other, and they spoke to guests only in response to an inquiry, in keeping with their desire to create a quiet and sacred space. Their meals were eaten slowly, in meditative silence. When the monks did speak to each other, they spoke in a spirit of gentleness and love. They reached out to each other when they sensed that one of their brothers was hurting, or in need, or perhaps was even going through what John of the Cross has called a “dark night of the soul.” It

was not unusual for a monk who was going through a difficult time, though he had not spoken a word of his inner struggle to his brothers, to return to his room at the end of the day and discover several hand-written cards or notes of encouragement.

As some of the monks, many of whom had spent their entire adult lives in this monastery, got older and died, others took their place. These new monks were often young people who had experienced the challenge of the Christian life and the caring of genuine Christian community through their contact with this very monastery. These new monks, since they knew what kind of a community and what kind of a life they were entering, always turned out to be just the kind of people the monastery needed. It was as if the spirit of the monastery, its *charisma*, was mysteriously passed on from one generation to another.

People from the surrounding area and people who had somehow heard about the monastery and came to explore it immediately sensed the special spirit of this sacred place. They didn't only come for religious services or retreats. Sometimes they just came to sit alone in the chapel for a few hours or browse through the bookstore. It was not unusual for families to come to picnic, to walk through the fields and woods surrounding the monastery. The grounds of the monastery were well kept with gardens and walkways that spoke of a quiet, contemplative life. The buildings and their furnishings were simple, but bright and immaculately clean.

This wonderful monastery gradually, almost imperceptibly fell upon hard times. When the few monks who remained gathered together to discuss it, no one knew exactly what had happened, when it had happened, and why. The spirit, the joy that was once so characteristic of their life together and their outreach to the community had dulled. It was now quite rare for clergy or laity to come to the monastery for a retreat or for spiritual direction, and when they did, they seldom returned. The religious services that, in years past, had taken place in a chapel that was full to overflowing were now attended only by the elderly abbot and the four elderly monks who were the only remaining members of the community. Young people who felt a call to the monastic life joined other communities. The monks seldom spoke to each other, seldom prayed together, and seemed irritated with each other more often than not.

The once beautiful grounds of the monastery were now overrun with weeds. The buildings that had once been so well kept had fallen into such a state of disrepair that most of them had to be closed. In the one building where the abbot and his monks now lived, the Motherhouse, the walls were gray and dirty. When light bulbs burned out, they were not always immediately replaced. The building and the grounds seemed to have taken on the depression that pervaded the spirit of the community, or perhaps it was the other way around. Clearly, the order was dying.

Not far from the monastery but still on its grounds, in a quiet spot in the woods, there was a little hut that had been built many years ago as a hermitage. Clergy and laity hardly ever asked to use it for silent retreats any more. The only person to use the little hermitage on a regular basis was an elderly rabbi from a nearby town.

There was something special about this rabbi. It was rumored that he was a holy man. Although the monks had little contact with him, for he tended to keep to himself, they could sense the depth of his spirituality. In fact, the monks were able to sense when the rabbi was using the hermitage for prayer, for his spiritual retreat, even though the hermitage was quite out of sight in the woods. The monks would whisper to each other "The rabbi is in the woods again." "The rabbi is in the woods again."

One day, the abbot was agonizing in prayer over the gradual but imminent death of his order. He was torn by his sense of the great tradition that had been entrusted to him, the tradition of his religious order and the great tradition of this monastery. He was deeply saddened by how far it had fallen, by the loss of the joyous spirit that had once filled his monks and overflowed to all who came to visit. He knew that his monks would stay to the bitter end if he asked them, but he knew it wasn't fair to have them spend their last days in such a dreary setting when they could transfer to another community.

Suddenly it occurred to him that he might go to the hermitage and visit with the rabbi. He had never really spent much time with this silent and reclusive guest. In addition, the rabbi might be able to offer some advice that could help the abbot with his problem. After all, the rabbi was rumored to be a holy man.

When the abbot arrived at the hermitage, the rabbi welcomed him with open arms as a fellow searcher and seeker. The abbot was touched, was deeply moved by how these two men of different religious traditions could be with each other in honesty,

could experience the care and respect that each held for the other. The abbot explained the purpose of his visit, describing in great detail what had happened to their monastery over the last few decades and sharing his feeling of despair about the future.

The rabbi listened carefully. Finally he spoke. "I know how it is," the rabbi said quietly. "The spirit has gone out of your monks. Because of this, the spirit has also gone out of the people from the surrounding area, the people who once drew comfort and strength from their association with your monastery and from their commitment to support it. It is the same in my town and in my religious tradition. Very few people come to synagogue anymore." The old abbot and the old rabbi sat together quietly, filled with love for their people and sadness at what they were no longer able to give them. They prayed, each from their own religious tradition. Then they sat quietly together and wept.

Night was falling. It was time for the abbot to leave. The two religious leaders embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but my heart is still heavy. I have failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you could give me to help me save my monastery?"

The rabbi stood for a moment in quiet reflection. Then he said, "I'm sorry that I have no advice to give to you on how to build up a community, how to make it come alive, how to recapture the spirit that will fill the members of your community with joy and which will help your monastery become a beacon of hope, a spiritual center for those in the area who desperately need just what you have to offer."

After a long and thoughtful pause, the rabbi continued, "There *is* one thing I can tell you, and I *know* this to be a fact. One of you is the Messiah."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him. "What did the rabbi say?" asked the monks. "He understood our problem," the abbot answered, "but he didn't have any advice. We just talked for a while and then we prayed together and wept. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving -- it was a rather cryptic statement -- was that one of us is the Messiah."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the monks pondered the rabbi's words both in their conversations with each other and in the silence of their own hearts.

One of us is the Messiah. One of us is the Messiah. How could that be? How could the Messiah be with us, be among us, even be one of us and we not recognize him? Then again, when the Messiah came into the world two thousand years ago, most people didn't recognize him. In fact, only a few shepherds and three wise men realized who he was. I guess it *is* possible that the Messiah could be living right here in our monastery, right here in our midst, and we not recognize him.

But if the Messiah is one of us, then who could it be? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? Certainly, if he meant anyone, it would be the abbot. Our abbot is a deeply religious person. He has been our spiritual leader for many years. But he gets depressed and discouraged at times. We also can't assume that the Messiah is automatically the person in authority. Remember, the rabbi didn't tell the abbot "*you* are the Messiah;" the rabbi said, "*one of you* is the Messiah." We know for a fact that Father Abbot is wondering about the rabbi's words and looking just as carefully at each of us as we are with each other and with him.

What about Brother Thomas? Do you think *he* could be the Messiah? Everyone knows that Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows he is a man of light. We also know how easily annoyed he becomes when things don't go his way, when things don't turn out as he would like. He's not very patient, but maybe this is because he takes things seriously and he cares about what we do and don't do as a community. Maybe Brother Thomas is the Messiah.

Certainly he *couldn't* have been referring to Brother William! William often gets so negative, so pessimistic or cynical. When someone has a new idea, Brother William has a knack for pouring cold water on it, for telling us why this new idea wouldn't work. But, come to think of it, even though we often experience him as a thorn in our sides, when we look back at what he said, he is often right. He is often *very* right. Maybe the rabbi *did* mean Brother William.

One thing we know for sure -- he didn't mean Brother Phillip. Phillip is so quiet and introverted. Wherever he is, he just sort of fades into the woodwork. Most of the time we don't even know that he's around. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah.

Wait a minute! Wait a minute! What if the Messiah isn't someone else? What if the rabbi meant me? What if *I* am the Messiah? But how would *he* know? How would *I* know? I know how small-minded and petty I can be at times, but I do care deeply about people. I do want to make this monastery a better place, a place where people can come to find God. He couldn't have possibly meant me! I'm just an ordinary person. Yet what if he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me! If he meant me, then I am going to have to start living a more prayerful, a more spiritual life.

As the elderly monks talked with each other and contemplated this matter in the silence of their own hearts, a change slowly began to take place in the monastery. The abbot and the monks began to look at each other carefully. They began to listen to each other carefully. They began to treat each other with gentleness, with sensitivity, and with extraordinary respect on the off chance that the rabbi was right, that one among them was the Messiah. And on the off, *off* chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to look more carefully at their own lives; they began to treat *themselves* with gentleness, with sensitivity, and with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which the monastery was situated was very beautiful, it happened that people still occasionally came to visit -- to picnic on the lawn, to wander along some of the paths, even to go into the small, dilapidated stone chapel to pray and meditate. As they did this, the people began to sense the aura of joy, of expectation, and of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the monks, that radiated out from them and permeated the atmosphere of the monastery. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling about the monastery. Without really knowing why, they found themselves coming back to the monastery more frequently to talk with the monks and to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And soon, their friends brought their friends.

It happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to spend more and more time with the monks. After a while, one of the men asked if he could join the order, if he could join the community. Then another. And another. People began to come to the monastery for retreats, for spiritual direction and guidance, and they returned. The religious services came alive with music and joy.

The support of the monastery and its missions grew many fold. Within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order.

The monks never discovered which of them was the Messiah. In fact, to this day they are still looking carefully, not only at each other, but also at themselves and at all who visit the monastery. But thanks to the rabbi's gift, the monastery has once again become a vibrant center of spirituality and outreach, not only for the members of the community but for all who enter its doors, all who come to worship, all who become a part of its life and mission.

*A story heard or read many years ago – revised and retold by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
January 31, 2010*

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, we come before on this communion Sunday aware of the gift you have given us in this sacrament. We gather around this table as the disciples gathered around the table with Jesus in the upper room. As we do, we sense his presence in our midst. We are reminded that he is always in our midst, but we do not always recognize him. We are reminded that he is always with us, but we do not always remember him. In this sacrament of remembrance, let us recall our Lord, calling him to be a central part of our life, and responding once again to his call to us, his invitation to become his disciple and his friend.

We come before you this morning as individuals, as searchers and seekers, as pilgrims on a spiritual journey. We know we have often fallen short of the life you would have us lead. We confess our sins, the sins of which we are only too aware and the other sins, the sins of which we are unconscious, and we ask both your forgiveness and your help in amending our ways. We come before you because we need your help in living the life you would have us lead. In this sacrament, we come into your presence as the disciples did of old, and we open our hearts to you, our minds to your Word, and our hands to the work you would have us do in the world.

We also come before you this morning as a community of faith. We come in affirmation of the faith tradition of this church, in celebration of its history, in commitment to its present life. We know that good deeds arise from faith. We also know that good deeds arise from community, from this community. As we enter into this stewardship season, rekindle the flame of faith within us that we might recommit ourselves both to our own individual spiritual journey and to this church, to the community of faith that nurtures it and which gives it expression in the world.

O God, in this moments of silent prayer, we hold before you all who are in special need: in the world, in our nation, in our church, in our families, and we also share honestly our own personal need not only for strength to carry the burdens which life has placed on our shoulders, but for the patience, the joy, affirmation of life that we need to carry them with grace. We pray in these moments for the deeper healing that only comes from you.

We ask this, our sanctuary prayer, and our many prayers both spoken and unspoken, in the spirit of our risen Lord. Amen.